

Access to the Past and the Present: A History of the M. C.
Migel Memorial Collection, American Printing House for the
Blind

Justin A. Gardner, Special Collections Librarian

M. C. Migel Memorial Collection, American Printing House
for the Blind

The M.C. Migel Memorial Collection has a rich and noteworthy history of service to the field of visual impairment. Originally conceived of by some of the most prominent leaders in the field, the collection was further developed by a uniquely qualified librarian over the course of her 35-year tenure. Although the Collection suffered through a brief period of uncertainty, it has been revived into perhaps the most far-reaching and accessible stage of its life.

Robert Irwin began advocating for a research library on visual impairment in 1926 - four years before his promotion to Executive Director of the American Foundation for the Blind. While still serving as their Director of Research and Education, he convinced the trustees of AFB to devote \$1,000 to development of a library at the Foundation. Within two years, the library numbered 800 volumes, pamphlets, and manuscripts. Irwin donated a large number of his personal books to the library and other donors followed suit. The collection grew so rapidly that by 1929, Irwin hired a full-time librarian named Helga Lende. Originally from Norway, Lende had a basic knowledge of German, Spanish, and French, in addition to English and her native Scandinavian languages. Her broad linguistic ability was essential to building the diverse collection that was to become the M.C. Migel Collection. Interestingly, a 1929 letter from Robert Irwin noted that a prominent figure in the field and the organization had been

Access to the Past and the Present

absent from the meeting to appoint Lende as librarian. That absentee was Moses Charles Migel (Koestler, 2005).

Migel was a prosperous silk manufacturer who made a second career of philanthropy for the visually impaired. Having learned of the Uniform Type Committee while volunteering at the New York Home for Blind Men and Women, he volunteered to be the “treasurer” for the newly formed Uniform Type Commission. As treasurer, he was in fact the sole source for the organization’s funding. Immediately following World War One, Migel took charge of rehabilitation services for blinded American soldiers by serving as a major in the Red Cross. Major Migel personally financed a team of 8 nurses to assist him in creating the Red Cross Bureau of Reconstruction and Reeducation in France (Koestler, 2005).

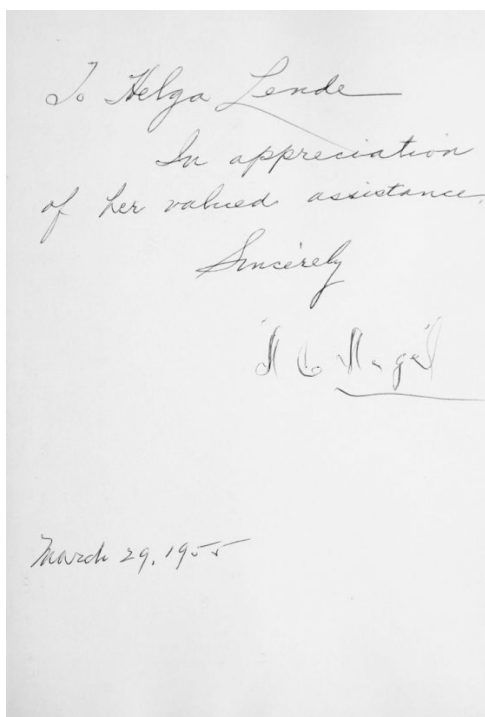
M.C Migel’s work continued after the War. He was integral to the formation of the American Foundation of the Blind, and began service as its first president in 1922. He helped create and preside-over the American Foundation for Overseas Blind / Helen Keller International. Migel contributed to the creation of the World Blind Union, and served as its vice-president. Migel and Robert Irwin collaborated to promote the Wagner-O'Day legislation, which ensures that the government use products manufactured by people who are blind. This further lead to the formation of the National Industries for the Blind in 1938, whose board Migel chaired. He was influential in the formation of what eventually became the National

Access to the Past and the Present

Library Service for the Blind through the Pratt-Smoot Act of 1931, and in establishing AFB's Talking Book Program in 1933 (Tuttle, 2007).

Whether it was because he missed the meeting or for another reason, Migel "never quite approved" (Koestler, 2005, p. 549) of the appointment of Helga Lende. But the trustees felt strongly enough about the library to, as Irwin stated, "save Miss Lende's salary from elimination from the budget" (Koestler, 2005, p. 549). Migel gave-in, and Lende served as the librarian for 35 years.

In addition to the Library, Lende managed AFB Publications and its series of 56 titles. She authored and edited several other works. Her "Books About the Blind" listed 4,200 items from the Library, many of which were essential but unpublished theses held in the collection. Helga Lende retired in 1964, leaving behind a library of 25,000 items. Just before retirement, the library was named after the person against whom the trustees had argued to justify the librarian's employment - M.C. Migel. By 1972, the M.C. Migel Memorial Library had 3 professional librarians on staff to manage its 30,000 items (Koestler, 2005).

A photograph of a handwritten inscription on a light-colored, textured surface, likely the cover of a book. The text is written in cursive ink. The first line reads "To Helga Lende". The second line, indented, reads "In appreciation". The third line, also indented, reads "of her valued assistance". The fourth line, centered, reads "Sincerely". The fifth line, centered, is a signature that appears to be "J. C. Migel". At the bottom left, the date "March 29, 1954" is written.

Migel's inscription to Lende in the cover of the Library's copy of "War of the Dots," by Robert Irwin.

Suffering from effects of the 2008 stock market collapse, AFB decided to move the library to an institution that could continue to manage it. APH President Tuck Tinsley decided that he wanted to bring the library to the American Printing House for the Blind (Hudson, 2015). "We selected APH to house the Migel Library because it is a repository of knowledge and is committed to preserving and expanding its book collection," said AFB president Carl Augusto. "With APH's popular annual meeting and its connection to a number of university prep programs, we are confident these important books will continue to educate people in our field for years to come," ("AFB eNews," 2009). In September of 2009, the general stacks were formally transferred from AFB to the American Printing House for the Blind in Louisville, KY (Hudson, 2015).

Access to the Past and the Present

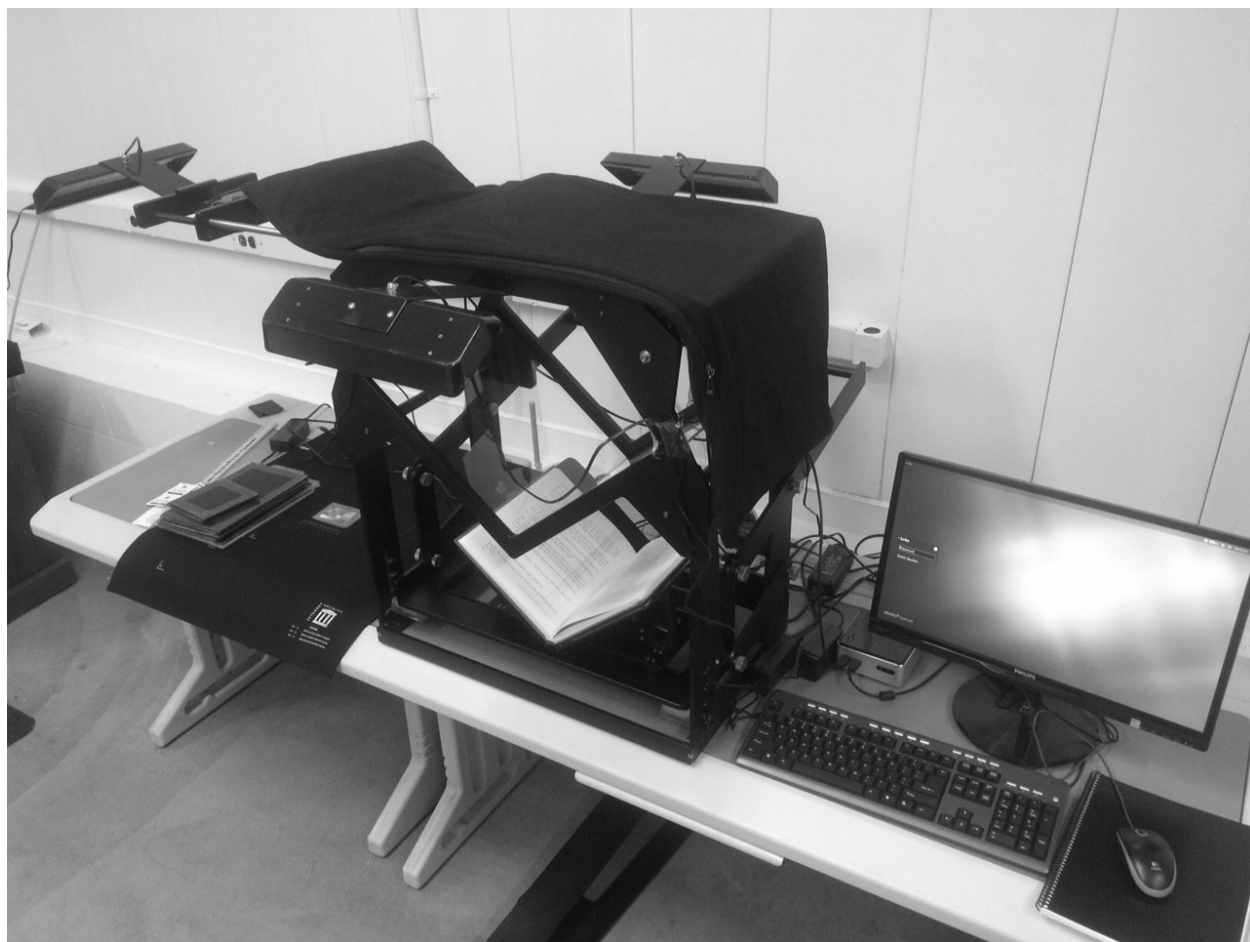


An un-cataloged collection of foreign language Helen Keller works was discovered in the Migel Collection in 2015. Now digitized, it includes works in Tamil, Urdu, Arabic, Bosnian, Burmese, Korean, Japanese, Polish, Thai, Persian, Croatian, Hebrew and Greek – among others. Many were printed in low numbers, and on paper of very poor quality.

The APH Migel Collection catalog was online by October of 2010. That year, a project was initiated to digitize out-of-copyright library items at Internet Archive. The project was initially co-funded by a grant from Lyris and the Sloan Foundation. But with financial support from the APH Endowment, the digitization project has continued to grow. To date, more than 6,800 items have been digitized at the Migel Library's Internet Archive page, with over 1.2 million views. Because of the work that Internet Archive does to provide formats such as Daisy and read-aloud full-text,

Access to the Past and the Present

these digitized items are accessed by print-disabled users all over the world. Additionally, APH was awarded an \$11,000 grant from the H.W. Wilson foundation to purchase a Table Top Scribe (TTS) in 2014. It enables books to be safely placed in a supportive, v-shaped cradle for digitization through still photography. Items too fragile, valuable, or rare to be shipped to Internet Archive can now be digitized in-house at APH.



The Table Top Scribe at home in the Migel Library.

It was while researching fiddler Michael Cleveland the same year that the seed was planted to develop a collection of works by blind musicians.

Access to the Past and the Present

Cleveland is a ten-time International Bluegrass Music Association “Fiddle Player of the Year” winner, with seven albums to his credit. But before that, he was a 1999 graduate of the Kentucky School for the Blind – located directly next to APH. There was little published biographical information on Michael Cleveland to place in the Migel Collection, so it was decided to add his albums.

Research already held in the Migel Library clearly reflected the significant historical role that music has played in the education and livelihoods of the visually impaired. Japan’s blind Biwa performers date back to 1220 CE, and the Ukrainian blind Kobzari music guilds began gaining popularity in the 1700s. Then, in 2012, the Michigan School for the Blind loaned the Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind Stevie Wonder’s childhood piano. With so many clear associations to music, research was started to determine if any organization had developed a collection of works by musicians who were visually impaired. After contacting several prominent organizations, no such collection could be found. In 2015, the H.W. Wilson Foundation again awarded APH a grant that was used to create the only known collection of music and literature created-by and about musicians who are visually impaired.

Access to the Past and the Present



A public listening station for works by visually impaired musicians was made available in 2015.

In addition to audio recordings and of and books about musicians who are visually impaired, the \$10,000 grant also provided funds to create a music listening station. An iPad Pro holds 236 albums that have been purchased for the collection. While the CDs are housed in the Migel Library, the listening station is available for public use in the Barr Library at APH. Patrons can listen to the works of the 113 different artists that are represented in the collection. Additionally, a playlist had been created on Spotify for listeners to follow anywhere in the world. Research is currently being done on adding essential original historical recordings to the collection, possibly to include 78 rpm records or cylinders.

The M. C. Migel Memorial Collection has had a history as rich as the information contained within its pages. The Collection will continue to thrive in the future, be it through expanded digitization and circulation projects with Open Library, or new research and collection development in specialized areas, such as the significance of the “blind detective” in literature. And, most importantly, interactions with both visually impaired and sighted researchers from Turkey to Nigeria have proven that accessibility to the collection is likely the best that it has ever been.

Secondary material by researchers who have consulted the Migel Collection

Clark, S. J. (2007). *Music literacy: Its role in the education of the blind*.

Goldstein, D. (2017). *My Song, My Delight: Selected Poems of Robert J. Smithdas*. G&H Soho.

In touch with learning: A history of the Georgia Academy for the Blind. (2011). Knoxville, TN: Georgia Academy for the Blind.

Jefferson, R. F. (n.d.). *The Color of Disability: Vasco Hale and Twentieth Century America*. Manuscript in preparation.

Maynard, P. R. (2016). *Toward Writing Skill with a Toddler Who Is Blind Using a Braille Writer*. Missouri State University.

Miller, H. H. (Ed.). (2015). *Recueil de morceaux d'orgue (1863) À l'usage spécial des élèves de l'Institution Impériale des Jeunes Aveugles de Paris*. A-R Editions.

Olstrom, C. E. (2011). *Undaunted by blindness: Concise biographies of 400 people who refused to let visual impairment define them*. Watertown, MA: Perkins School for the Blind.

Rubery, M. (2016). *The untold story of the talking book*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Slaughter Stalvey, M. L. (2014). *Love Is Not Blind: Eugenics, Blindness, and Marriage in the United States, 1840-1940*. Toledo, OH: University of Toledo.

Thompson, K. D. (1996). *Beyond the double night*. Taylorsville, KY: Buggy Whip Press.

Reference List

American Foundation for the Blind. (2009, September). AFB's Migel Library Moves to the American Printing House for the Blind. *AFB ENews*.

American Foundation for the Blind. (2009, August 26). AFB's Prestigious M.C. Migel Memorial Library is Moving to the American Printing House for the Blind. Retrieved April 02, 2018, from <http://www.afb.org/info/afbs-prestigious-mc-migel-memorial-library-is-moving-to-aph/5>

Ferranti, H. D. (2009). *The last biwa singer: A blind musician in history, imagination, and performance*. Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell Univ.

Hudson, M. (2015). *Remembrances of Migel Process*. Unpublished manuscript, American Printing House for the Blind, Louisville.

Koestler, F. A. (2005). *The unseen minority: A social history of blindness in the United States*. New York: AFB Press.

Kononenko, N. O. (1998). *Ukrainian Minstrels: And the Blind Shall Sing (Folklores and folk cultures of Eastern Europe)*. M.E. Sharpe / Books.

Tuttle, Dean and Naomi. (n.d.). Moses Charles (M.C.) Migel, Hall of Fame: Leaders and Legends of the Blindness Field, American Printing House for the Blind. Retrieved March 28, 2017, from <https://www.aph.org/hall/inductees/migel/>